

Walt Whitman Birthplace  
West Hills, L. I., N. Y.  
NASSAU Co.

HABS No. NY-541

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NY

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

District No. NY-5

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Lester B. Pope, District Officer  
Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, N.Y.

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Walt Whitman Birthplace  
West Hills, Nassau County, New York

Owner or Custodian

Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Watson

Date of Erection

1810

Architect

Unknown (probably none)

Builder

Walter Whitman

Present Condition

Good. Preserved as an historical shrine.

No. of Stories

Two stories and attic

Materials of Construction

Stone masonry foundation, wood floors, plaster walls, wood shingles on all sides and roof, second section interior walls refinished after fire in 1910, minor alterations after 1917.

Other Existing Records

An old photograph showing the original three sections of the house before destruction by fire in 1910.

Additional Data

This old house is located on the east side of Huntington - Amityville Road, five and a half miles south of the village of Huntington in West Hills, L. I., N. Y.

In 1816 Walter Whitman, a carpenter and house builder, brought his bride, Louisa Van Velsor to a home in West Hills a part or all of which he had erected in 1810. It was in this house that Walt Whitman, the poet, and second son of the family was born on May 31, 1819. The family lived here until Walt was four years of age,

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when they moved to Brooklyn.

In 1917 the present owners bought the house. It was then restored and has been altered very little since.

Erection of House

It is an established fact that some portion, or all of this house, was built in 1810. The oldest photographs obtainable show it to be constructed with three sections.

The third section or east wing was destroyed by fire in 1910 and the second section was scuttled at the same time but the frame remained intact. When the owner in that period repaired the damage, he did not reconstruct the third section but contented himself with finishing the second part by replacing new shingles for the old burned ones, patching out the roof and finishing the interior with ceiling boards on both side walls and ceiling in place of the original plaster. However, the original "Dutch" door and other interior doors of this section were saved and are still in use. One may see here the original hand made hardware including the old "HL" hinges. Since Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Watson, the present owners, purchased the house in 1917 the front part of this remodeled portion has been used as a dining room and a new window has been placed in the east wall. The rear part of this same portion of the house is on a lower level and has been divided and used as a kitchen and pantry. It is opportune to note here that this lower part

Erection of House  
Cont'd.

of the house is shown in an artist's drawing now in possession of Mrs. Watson as an open wood shed covered by the original roof. However, this lower level, if ever open, was enclosed many years ago as is evident by the worn shingles on the exterior wall. There is an old stairs having the same peculiarities as the other stairs in the house leading from this space to the attic of this wing.

The first section or main house has plain but interesting details. The main hall which separates the second section from the living portion of the first section is entered either from the front or rear through short doors having small transoms above. These doors are old, but by careful examination of the jambs, it becomes evident that at some previous time "Dutch" doors were used in these openings. There is a random width flush board wainscot in this hall, capped with a neat moulded strip at a height of twenty-eight inches from the new floor. This wainscoting runs horizontal until it comes to the stairs where it parallels the same in a panel form from steps to the wood covered soffet of stairs above. Also the partition under the first floor stairs is made of single thickness vertical boarding from floor to stringer.

The stairs which are very plain are unique in design, in so much as the two top risers on each stair are shorter than the rest. The top one being the smaller of the two. As this occurs at the top of each of the three stairs, it

Erection of House  
Cont'd

seems as though this irregularity was intentional. The balusters are square and so spaced that after running for several treads with the regular two on a tread the space between riser and baluster becomes so great that an additional baluster is added. This occurs on both the stairs from first floor to second floor and also from the second floor to the attic.

From the main hall one enters the living quarters of the first section through an enlarged opening. The door for the original opening is still on the premises. There is also an original opening and door to the second section or dining room.

The fireplaces throughout are simple in design but nicely proportioned. The flues of all three fireplaces are brought together in one chimney before passing through the roof. This is accomplished by means of corbeling in the form of an inverted V. The entire corbeling is accomplished in the attic space with hand made brick of reddish clay laid up with what appears to be a red clay mortar joint.

In the attic can be seen the original hand-hewn tapering rafters, apparently taking their shape from the trees out of which they were cut. One can also see the original mortice jointing and wood pegging used in that day still holding the structure together.

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Present Condition

The house is in good condition and well preserved under the excellent care of Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Watson.

Materials of Construction  
(Interior)

Plaster walls in all rooms except the dining-room; brick fireplaces; American Bond brick chimney; chair rails around plaster walls in all major rooms; new flooring on the first floor; original wide boards on the second floor preserved; The present owners effected a few changes on the first and second floors. On the first floor they widened the doorway between parlor and hall and cut an east window in the dining-room. On the second floor the only alterations are the converting of a small bedroom into a bathroom and the cutting of an entrance from the main bedroom to the hall as is noted on the plans.

Sources Consulted

Information from:-

Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Watson (present owners)

Mrs. Hall, Librarian, Huntington Historical Society

Approved

*Lester B. Pope*  
Lester B. Pope  
District Officer  
Historic American  
Buildings Survey  
Brooklyn-Long Island

Signed

*Frank E. Hurley, Jr.*  
Frank E. Hurley, Jr.  
Asst. Project Supervisor  
Historic American Buildings  
Survey

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Addendum to:

Walt Whitman Birthplace  
West Hills (Huntington vicinity)  
Long Island  
Suffolk County  
New York

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PHOTOGRAPH

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C.